DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 416 534 CS 509 730

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TITLE Images of Disability in News Media: Implications for Future Research.
PUB DATE 1997-11-00
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Communication Association (83rd, Chicago, IL, November 19-23, 1997).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Civil Rights; *Disabilities; Disability Discrimination; Higher Education; *Mass Media Role; Media Research; Minority Groups; *News Media; *Research Needs
IDENTIFIERS *Media Coverage; *Research Suggestions

ABSTRACT

Even in the 1990s, little research has focused on how local media can more often and more accurately cover the disability community and disability issues. Some positive news coverage arose in the late 1980s because of the disability community's growing status as a minority group striving for equal civil rights. Other positive coverage reflected the consumer model, in which equity in society for people with disabilities is seen as good economic sense. A new negative image, however, includes the business model, which depicts economic equity for people with disabilities as costly to the American business community. Another issue is whether people with disabilities are given a "voice" in the news media--are they speaking for themselves? Mass media researchers should be looking for valid sources in the news; they should continue to assess who is speaking for the disability community in the news media. Communication research should continue to assess why and how news media prop up "ableist" views within society. Research must also assess journalists' attitudes about disability. The news media have begun to successfully change some of their language about disability--they are now likely to use "disabled" rather than "handicapped," or person with AIDS rather than AIDS victim. The media's powerful place in the social construction of people with disabilities may become a positive, rather than negative, force, and the future research of communication scholars must be focused on assessing this potential change. (Contains 12 notes.) (NKA)

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ED 416 534

IMAGES OF DISABILITY IN NEWS MEDIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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Paper presented at the National Communication Association annual meeting, November 1997, Chicago, Illinois.

CS 509730

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IMAGES OF DISABILITY IN NEWS MEDIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

By Beth Haller, Ph.D.

Much good mass media research has focused on how U.S. print and broadcast media can better diversify their news coverage in terms of:

* ethnic communities,

* gender/ sexual orientation,

* even age.

However, even in the 1990s little research has focused how local media can more often and more accurately cover the disability community and disability issues. Yet, people with disabilities and their families are becoming a much more vocal and visible segment of American society.

Types of past topical coverage issues:

In the 1970s, some rehabilitation researchers saw that news was a strong cultural indicator and had influence on societal treatment of disability issues. A few turned some of their attention to the impact of news media coverage on their clients.[1] Bogdan and Biklen's seminal work explaining the concept of "handicapism" began to be applied to studies of news media coverage of disability.[2]

In the 1980s the late John Clogston and other mass media scholars studied how the newspapers covered the American disability community. His findings tied to the long-time complaints from that community that much of the news media coverage is patronizing and stigmatizing.

Negative stereotypes have included:

-- representing people with disabilities as sick, needy invalids

-- or like inspirational superheroes, known as supercrips.[3]

However, some positive news coverage also arose in the late 1980s because of the disability community's growing status as a minority group that was striving for equal civil rights. Federal legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) put disability concerns on the public's agenda. In my study of the ADA, I found major American newspapers did a fairly good job of getting the general governmental information about the 1990 legislation out to the public.

The positive images include:

-- the minority group model, in which the disability community is seen as deserving of civil rights,

-- the consumer model, in which equity in society for people with disabilities in society is seen as good economic sense.

The new negative images include:

-- the business model, which depicts economic equity for people with disabilities as costly to the U.S. business community.

Another issue is whether people with disabilities are given a "voice" in the news media. Are they speaking for themselves? These past problems with stereotyping coverage has had implications for the political activists in the disability community's lack of desire to even have its issues in the news media. Joe Shapiro argued that the disability rights activists pushing for the ADA in the late 1980s made a conscious effort to bypass media coverage for fear their message would be distorted.[4] And my 1995 study of news coverage of the ADA found that only 35% of the stories in major newspapers were sourced with a representative from a disability group.[5]

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

So what should mass media researchers be focusing on in terms of coverage of the disability community?

Sources in the news -- Even with a higher profile in the culture, journalists still rarely know where to look for a spokesperson from the disability community. We must continue to assess who is speaking for the disability community in the news media.

Leaders of the community should be speaking for themselves these days. Anything else is potentially patronizing.

Attitudes -- Disability brings up emotional fears for people that they may one day acquire a disability [6] (known as the "fate worse than death" scenario by disability rights activists). Journalists may not understand the imbedded cultural biases they may carry with them, so they feel outright pity for people with disabilities. Research must assess journalists's attitudes about disability. They are a group with huge power to define the disability community for the United States.

> Example: The volatile issue of assisted suicide. In January 1997, several hundred people with disabilities and their advocates stood before the U.S. Supreme Court in protest of assisted suicide deaths of people with disabilities. This life-or-death issue for the disability community was ripe for in-depth news media coverage. The event did draw coverage by *USA Today*, CNN, the *Washington Post*, and "Nightline." The implications of this type of media attention need to be studied. The assisted suicide issue and its media coverage illustrate the ramifications of news media images in the real lives of people with disabilities. If news media images reinforce a notion that disability is a fate worse than death, then assisted suicide might be shown in a positive light. A cursory glance at news media coverage of this issue and a discussion with the leader of Not Dead Yet shows that

the news media rarely focused on the disability perspective or even included comments from activist organizations. An exploratory look at major newspaper coverage of the issue, which went before the Supreme Court in 1997, showed that concerns of disabled people were rarely discussed.

Good news media coverage, both print and broadcast -- Too often researchers look to what journalists do badly, which gives little information on how to explain to society what good and accurate representations look like. Admittedly non-stigmatizing coverage of disability issues is limited but looking at the more excellent coverage can help provide a template of good coverage that other journalists might be able to follow.

For example, winners of the National Easter Seals EDI Awards honors excellence in non-stigmatizing news media coverage of disability in the areas of print and broadcast.[7]

Additionally, it is crucial that broadcast be included in this sample because too often broadcast news either ignores disability issues that have no visual elements or stigmatizes people with disabilities through fluffy, inspirational features.[8]

Changes in handicapism and ableism -- Although images of people with disabilities in news media have become less stigmatizing in the past 30 years, many negative images still remain. In today's media world, the annual Jerry Lewis Telethon still exists with its

pitying message that children with disabilities are broken and need to be fixed.[9] The newly disabled Christopher Reeve has become the media's disability darling because of his "inspiration" and his message for a cure for spinal cord injuries. Communication research needs to continue to assess why and how news media prop up these "ableist" views within society.

Language issues -- The news media have begun to successfully change some of their language about disability. They are more likely to use the term disabled rather than handicapped, or person with AIDS rather than AIDS victim. But other media terms, which represent a belief in the enslavement of people with disabilities, continue, such as "confined to a wheelchair" or "wheelchair-bound." Corbett says the disability right movement must acknowledge the power of language and must reject societal terms about disability that are patronizing and demeaning. "What needs to be challenged is the language which retains a metaphorical suffering, pathos and dependency," Corbett says.[10]

Lastly, the communication research of the future must analyze the disability rights actions as news events because this is the time that disability issues speak within "the language of news" i.e. behaving like a societal group that deserves coverage. Haller showed (1993) that when a disability group protests actively and loudly, it gains the media's attention for more thorough coverage. The coverage becomes less stigmatizing because the disability group is covered just as other societal group would be. [11]

As Hall has explained, news media representations are "contested terrain" in which different sides of an issue battle for control over presentation and language.[12] The media coverage of disability activists illustrates that gradual shifts are taking place in the media's social construction of disability. As Clogston has shown in the media models representing disability, their traditional constructions have been ones associated with medical dependency, superhuman feats, or a disadvantaged status in society. These constructions still hold true in much of the rhetoric and images in media stories about people with disabilities.

However, when people with disabilities engage in vigorous protest for their rights, these traditional tropes become more malleable. When disability activists pull people together as a minority group or social movement, the media accept the civil rights construction delineated by the disability group. A new construction of people with disabilities potentially flows through the media, one that can begin to reject old stereotypes in favor of new more progressive representations.

When people with disabilities take an active stance and grab the limelight, they are confronting their social stereotype as passive, disadvantaged people. And they plug into the media's news values that reward change, action, and consequence in journalistic discourse. Therefore, the media's powerful place in the social construction of people with disabilities may become a positive, rather than negative, force, and the future research of communication scholars must be focused on assessing this potential change.

Endnotes

1.E. K. Byrd, (1979). Magazine articles and disability. American Rehabilitation, 4:4, 18-20. & T.R. Elliot & E.K. Byrd, (1982). Media and disability. Rehabilitation Literature, 43, 348-355.

2.Robert Bogdan & Douglas Biklen, (1977). Handicapism. Social Policy, 7, 14-19.

3. John S. Clogston, Disability Coverage in 16 Newspapers. (Louisville: Advocado Press, 1990).

4. Joe Shapiro, "Disability policy and the media: A stealth civil rights movement bypasses the press and defies conventional wisdom," Policy Studies Journal, 1993.

5.Beth Haller, Disability Rights on the Public Agenda: Elite News Coverage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI, 1995).

6.Frank Bowe. Handicapping America. (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 108-9.

7. The author of this paper has been a judge in the EDI awards broadcast news division for three years and has videotapes of all the entries, not just the winners.

8. Haller's 1995 study found that in the six years before and after the ADA was passed, that all three network evening news programs did only 23 stories on the legislation combined.

9.Beth Haller, (Winter 1994). "The Misfit and Muscular Dystrophy," Journal of Popular Film and Television, 21:4.

10. Jenny Corbett, (1996). Bad-Mouthing, The Language of Special Needs. London: The Falmer Press.

11. Beth Haller, (Winter 1993). "Paternalism and Protest: Coverage of Deaf Persons in the Washington Post and New York Times," Mass Comm Review, 20:3/4.

12. Stuart Hall, et al., (1978). Policing the Crisis. New York: Holmes and Meier.